

EVERY CHILD A READER TOPIC 2

Concepts of Print, Letter Naming, and Phonemic Awareness

Two powerful predictors of first-grade reading achievement are letter-name knowledge and **phonemic awareness** (the conscious awareness of the sounds in spoken words). To apply this knowledge successfully to learning to read, children need to understand the purpose and conventions of reading and writing.

Many children have been taught by parents and preschool teachers to recite the alphabet and even to identify rhyming words. Although this is an excellent start, children may remain confused about learning to read unless they develop fundamental concepts of print. These include knowing that print carries a message, that print represents the sounds in spoken language, and that English print has conventions such as left-right and top-bottom movement. These concepts give children the motivation to attend to small and abstract parts of writing—letters—and to the spoken sounds associated with letters.¹

“To learn to read, children need to be attentive to the purposes of written language, the distinctive features of the alphabet, and the relationship of spoken to written language.”

Recognizing letter names requires attention to the most distinct features of print—an essential skill for learning to read. Teachers should remember the challenge of this task for young children: there are confusing pairs of letters such as f and t, and h and n, as well as the troublesome foursome of b, d, p, and q. There are also upper- and lowercase forms of letters, two types of script (manuscript and cursive), and numerous fonts. Further, by itself a letter conveys no meaning to a child. It is only when a letter is tied to something meaningful, such as the child’s name, that it becomes meaningful. Teaching young children to name letters without basing this learning in the hows and whys of reading has not produced faster or better reading acquisition.²

Successful first-grade readers possess fairly well-developed phonemic awareness (knowing that words, such as *cat*, can be segmented into constituent sounds of /c/ /a/ /t/.³ This attention to **phonemes** (the unit of sound corresponding roughly to a letter) in spoken language is critical because beginning readers must be able to segment words into phonemes and blend phonemes to sound out words. Although phonemic awareness is necessary for using **phonics** (knowledge of specific letter-sound associations), phonemic awareness is not an interchangeable label for phonics. Phonemic awareness involves the awareness of and the ability to manipulate sounds, while phonics involves connecting sounds with letters.

Accomplishments for Concepts of Print, Phonemic Awareness, and Letter Naming⁴

PRESCHOOL	KINDERGARTEN	FIRST GRADE
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Know that alphabet letters are a special type of graphics that can be individually recognized	Points to print when listening to any familiar text or when rereading own writing	Blends or segments the phonemes of most one-syllable words
Recognizes familiar print such as signs in the classroom	Recognizes and names all upper-and lowercase letters	Knows many one-to-one letter-sound correspondence
Knows that it is the print that is read in stories	Understands that the sequence of letters in a written word represents the sequence of sounds (phonemes) in a spoken word (alphabetic principle)	Understands punctuation and book features
Understands that different texts are used for different purposes (e.g., a list for groceries)	Understands that spoken words consist of a sequence of phonemes	
Attends to separable and repeating sounds in language (e.g., Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater)	Identifies which one is different when given spoken set (e.g., dan, dan, den)	
Shows interest in books	Identifies which two share sounds from a spoken set (e.g., mac, pat, ten)	
Displays reading and writing attempts (e.g., "Look at my story.")	Produces a word that rhymes when given a spoken word	
Identifies 10 alphabet letters, especially those from own name	Counts the number of syllables in a word	
"Writes" (scribbles) messages as part of playful activity (insert line here) Begins to attend to beginning or rhyming sound in prominent words		

Knowledge about letters, sounds, words, and books varies considerably among the entering kindergarteners in any school. Some children know only a handful of letters, while others name letters and rhyme words confidently. Typical kindergarten activities such as word wall and journal writing allow a class with varying early reading skills to acquire knowledge at different paces. While one child attends to the initial consonant of a word on the word wall, another uses the middle and ending of the word to recognize it.

“The accomplishments convey the expectation that young children should be prepared for beginning reading by first grade, if not earlier.”

Although these early concepts and skills are necessary for learning to read, they cannot be equated with learning to read. Nor can any one of these skills be viewed as sufficient by itself to learn to read. Today, phonemic awareness dominates early reading programs in the manner that letter naming did in previous generations because it is associated with successful first-grade reading. At the same time, the vast majority of children acquire phonemic awareness whether or not it is explicitly taught to them. Further, the integration of phonemic awareness with knowledge of letter names in order to decode unknown words in texts is the ultimate goal, not proficiency on subskills of early reading concepts and skills⁵.

Instruction That Promotes Early Concepts and Skills

Consistent talk

Consistent talk about the presence and functions of written language occurs in kindergarten classrooms where children who have few concepts of print become prepared for reading. Many common events in early childhood classrooms can be occasions for discussions about written words.

“Through consistent classroom conversations, children come to attend to the functions and features of print in books and on signs.”

- Morning message allows children to see written records of personally important news: “I lost a tooth last night,” or “My aunt’s having a baby.”
- Signs that communicate classroom rules such as “Only Three in the Library Center” provide occasions for using print as part of “everyday” life.
- A sign-in for beverage at snack time requires children to place their names by their choices (e.g., milk, apple juice).

An important ingredient of these events is the talk about print⁶. As teachers read from big books and charts, they talk with children about letters, words, and sentences. Big books and charts provide occasions for teachers to demonstrate oral and written language associations through **tracking** (tracing a finger under the words as they are read) and to reinforce the **directionality** (left to right and top to bottom) of written English. In first grade, teachers refer to letters, words, and sentences as they teach reading and it is crucial that children understand these terms.

Word walls

Word walls have many uses in primary classrooms, the first of which is to establish a focus group of words for particular letters in kindergarten classrooms⁷. Words such as *Hallie*, *hamster*, and *hamburger* might be clustered under the letters *H*, *h*, while *Caitlin*, *Curious George*, *crayons*, and *cookies* appear below *C*, *c*. As these examples show, the sources for these words are children's names and those of characters in books and words from the classroom, cartoons, and traffic signs. The focus letters of word walls change over a kindergarten year. Letters do not need to be presented in their consecutive order in the alphabet, and unknown letters can be introduced alongside known letters a children learn new letter names.

“Word walls and journal writing foster letter naming and concepts of print.”

Journal writing and shared writing

Journal writing is a common classroom activity that begins in kindergarten⁸. Some kindergartners may write their first messages with letters made out of plastic, foam, and sandpaper due to unfamiliarity with letters. Children who can form letters may choose to draw pictures in their journals or pretend to write with a wavy line. With teachers' encouragement, children begin to write words (often the first letter of the word), phrases, or sentences.

Shared writing—a joint venture of teacher and students—assists children in attending to letters as the group writes a story. As children take turns serving as the scribe for the group's message, they can use words from the word wall and can apply their letter-sound knowledge.

Shared reading

Shared reading is common in primary grades and can be connected to shared writing if children read the stories the group writes. Read-alouds in kindergarten involve many kinds of books. Some of the most enjoyable read-alouds occur with texts that focus on alliteration and rhyming.

“Instruction promoting phonemic awareness engages children in hearing, segmenting, and blending the sounds in words.”

Read-Aloud Books for Developing Phonemic Awareness⁹

- *Faint frogs feeling feverish and other terrifically tantalizing tongue twisters* (Obligado, L., 1983). Each letter of the alphabet is presented in an alliterative statement. The text for s is “smiling snakes sipping strawberry sodas, a shy spider spinning, and a swordfish sawing.”
- *Alphabears* (Hague, K., 1984). Alliteration is used to introduce each letter of the alphabet. For example, Pam (a teddy bear) likes popcorn and pink lemonade, while another teddy bear, John, loves jam and jelly.
- *Oh, a-hunting we will go* (Langstaff, J., 1974). The traditional rhyme is adapted to include a brontosaurus who is put in a chorus; an armadillo who is put in a pillow.
- *The listening walk* (Showers, P., 1991). A girl takes a walk with her father and dog, and they hear many sounds, including “bik bok bik bok” (the sounds of high heels on the pavement).

Reading and rereading books like these and reciting favorite lines promotes phonemic awareness. Marching and clapping in time to the rhymes draws children’s attention to distinct syllables. These rhymes become part of the classroom’s language. As children form a line, the teacher chants, “Oh, a-lunching we will go, a-lunching we will go, we’ll eat some bread and eat it ’til we’re fed, a-lunching we will go.”

Language games

Language games such as those where a puppet speaks in an exaggerated way, stretching the sounds in words, are effective in increasing phonemic awareness¹⁰. This stretching of sounds shows children how to segment sounds—part of successful phonics analysis. Sometimes, the puppet talks only with the sounds elongated and the children need to “put the sounds together”—the blending required for reading unknown words.

Letter-sound matching

Writing allows phonemic awareness and letter-sound recognition to develop hand-in-hand because it requires children to represent the sounds they hear concretely with letters. Many occasions for seeing the letters associated with phonemes, including sandpaper letters that children trace while they say the associated sound, occur in effective kindergartens.

Insert line space

At the same time, teachers should encourage children to form letters themselves with felt markers and pencils. This requires that children attend to the distinctiveness of letters. Teacher dictation of short sentences that include words with particular letter-sound correspondences provides children an occasion for applying what they have learned, both

about phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences. After reading a book with the repetitive line “The cat sat on the mat,” a target sentence might be “The cat sat.”

“Phonemic awareness is most effective when it is integrated with letter-sound instruction.”

Instruction for English Language Learners

English language learners and children who speak a vernacular dialect of English present challenges to our reading programs. The linguistic issues are not trivial, nor should they be disregarded. However, neither should we believe that English language learners cannot learn well or on a reasonable time line. English language learners respond well to meaningful activities such as language games and word walls, especially when the activities are consistent and focus on particular sounds and letters.

“Teachers need to balance sensitivity to the demands placed on English language learners when acquiring early reading concepts and skills with high expectations, knowing that most children will learn to read well by the end of the primary grades if involved in consistent and well-designed instruction.”

Songs and poems that are easily memorized can be used to teach phonemic awareness and print concepts to English language learners. While listening to children chant jump rope rhymes on the playground, an educator heard children segmenting and blending words. But in their reading lessons, they weren’t using this knowledge. When rhymes such as “Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, dressed in black, black, black” were presented on charts, books, and computers, children could apply their blending and segmenting skills to the task of beginning reading¹¹.

Instruction for Children Who Struggle With Early Concepts and Skills

There are first graders who require intensive support from a qualified teacher if they are to be successful in beginning reading instruction¹². These interventions, described in Topic 8, should occur early in first grade, consist of concentrated and consistent sessions, and provide a teacher-student ratio that permits high levels of teacher attention and feedback to individual children.

“Although first-grade interventions are necessary for some children, the best intervention is well-designed kindergarten instruction.”

These first-grade interventions need to be preceded with focused, well-implemented kindergarten instruction. Such kindergarten instruction can substantially increase the number of children who are prepared for first-grade reading, especially in high poverty schools¹³. Successful kindergarten programs include the components presented in this pamphlet—shared reading, journal and shared writing, and language games.